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ABSTRACT

This paper tells the story of its authors' living and teaching experiences in Afghanistan from 1967 to 1969. The paper explains that "Don" taught at Kabul University, "Alleen" taught at the American International School of Kabul, and their three young children were in elementary school. It describes their day-to-day activities and relates their sometimes unusual experiences and adventures in such an exotic place. It also focuses especially on the Afghan sense of humor and sense of play. (NKA)

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By Don Nilsen and Alleen Nilsen

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INTENTIONAL AND UNINTENTIONAL AFGHAN HUMOR: "LOCAL LOGIC" AT ITS BEST
REVISED: 12/24/2001

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"Salaam Aleykom!" This is a typical Islamic greeting, and it is in the Arabic language. It is also a typical greeting in Afghanistan, even though Farsi (the language of Iran) and Dari and Pashto (the languages of Afghanistan) are more closely related to English than they are to Arabic. Like English, Dari is an Indo-European Language. Arabic, on the other hand is a Hamito-Semitic Language that is related to Hebrew. The words in both Arabic and Hebrew are constructed of three consonants such as S, L, and M. Prefixes, infixes, and suffixes are then added to these three consonants, so that an Arabic word like "salaam" meaning "peace" can become the religion of peace, "Islam," or the people of peace (Muslem or Musleman). The word for peace in Hebrew is "shalom," very much like the word for "peace" in Arabic "salaam." But most of the people of Afghanistan are Muslims, so they study the Quran in Arabic, and they use the Arabic writing system, and because of this very many words have been borrowed from Arabic into Dari and Pashto, the languages of Afghanistan.

From 1967 until 1969, Alleen, Don, Kelvin, Sean, and Nicolette Nilsen were living in Kabul, Afghanistan. Don taught at Kabul University; Alleen taught at the American International School of Kabul, and Kelvin, Sean and Nicolette were in elementary school. These two years were truly exotic. Where else would it have been possible to see a competition of tent-pegging during Jeshyn (a time of festival). This is a game where horsemen from various teams ride down on a fake enemy emcampment, and use their lances to pull the tent pegs out of the ground thus allowing the tent to fall down onto the "enemy." Where else would it have been

possible to see a competetion of "buz-keshi" on the King's birthday. This is a game where a dead goat with its head cut off is soaked with water and is then carried over a prescribed route by two competing teams of horsemen to be finally deposited by the winner in front of the king's pavillion. Where else would it have been possible for a six-foot one-inch player to have played Center for the team competing for the national basketball championship. Where else could a commoner like me have played tennis with the country's Crown Prince?

The Nilsens had many adventures in Afghanistan and all of these adventures told things about the country and its people. One day as we were on our way the university, Alleen and Don saw a truck so overloaded with sacks of grain that it was top heavy. An Afghan on the back of the truck was tryijng to catch the sacks of grain as they were falling off the truck. The cabs of Afghan trucks are built a yard or so wider on both sides than are ordinary cabs to provide more space for travelers, so when we pulled along side of the truck to tell the driver what was happening, we weren't speaking to the driver at all, but instead, we were speaking to the afghan who was sitting to the left of the driver. And we were trying to speak Dari. And the Afghans just understand what we were saying. So we drove in front of the truck and slowed down, hoping that they would stop, and fix the grain sacks. But the truck's load was so heavy that its breaks didn't work, and besides, their right tire got onto the soft shoulder of the road, and my rear-view mirror I could see the truck, first slowly, and then more rapidly, tip over. I ran over to the truck to see if anyone was hurt, but I didn't stay long, because I was outnumbered, and the Afghans weren't looking too happy. When we drove back by the same spot later that day, the truck was gone, and every kernel of grain had been cleaned up as well.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Major roads come to the Afghan border and stop. There are no railroads in the entire country. Since it is the middle of central Asia, however, just

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above the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, it has a strategic location, and many countries have therefore tried to conquer Afghanistan. The hordes of Genghis Khan failed. The British failed. The Russians failed. The Americans may fair better, but only if the tribal battles can be controlled.

When the Nilsens were there in Afghanistan the country had three commercial airplanes, but but one of the planes crashed during a heavy fog in London when an Afghan pilot disobeyed the instructions of the airport personnel. Within a month of this crash, the Afghans had taxied their second plane into their third plane.

In 1968, Afghanistan had no major hotels (The Intercontinental Hotel was at the time being built), and no television. The Nilsens had radio-free Europe, and we also had an APO address, to get mail through a diplomatic pouch, but we still felt a bit cut off from the rest of the world, so we decided to. So we decided toget ourselves a telephone. We lived in Carta Se (the Third Quarter), a major suburb of Kabul, but we still had to pay for the telephone pole and the line to run to our house. After everything was set up at the Nilsen home, the phone was still dead, so Don went to the Kabul telephone Company trying to make the final arrangements in Dari. He was sent from one station to the next until he was finally handed a telephone. He had no idea who he was talking to, but he was tired of speaking Dari, so he said, "Hello, do you speak English?" From the other end of the line came the response, "Of course I speak English: I'm your son, Kelvin." It was like a voice from God.

One day the Nilsens were visiting a Greek ruins. It was a huge mound of dirt with many underground chambers. Afghan kids were trying to sell us original classical Greek coins. We were far from and were feeling a bit apprehensive. As we came out of the ruins, we looked off into the distance and saw a truck load of Afghans in turbins and "pyjamas." The truck had high

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sides and the Afghans had climbed to the top of the truck side so that they could see better. The truck was clearly coming in our direction, and we thought we might have done something wrong. Finally, one of the Afghans shouted, "Hey, Professor Nilsen." He had been one of my students at the university, and he had recognized our car and was coming to say a special "Salaam Aleykom" to his teacher. He had become an English tacher himself, and had brought his class out on a fieldtrip.

Afghanistan was a country without a sewer system. In the middle of each street was a small stream, called a "juuwie" that carried water and sewage to the river or to open lakes of sewer. The second floors of buildings had pipes that reached half way across the street so that sewage could be dropped into the "Juuwie" running down the middle of the street. For the regular Afghan people, there was no toilet paper, and so Afghans had to be very careful always to use the left hand for cleaning themselves, because they used their right hand for eating from a communal table. One of the worst punishments for an Afghan, therefore, is to have his right hand cut off, for that meant that he could no longer eat from a communal table. Europeans who wanted to have toilet paper in an Afghan restroom, would have to bring their own. Many Afghan houses didn't have indoor plumbing, so perhaps the Afghan people had a point when they said that it was unfair for them to have to carry water to their homes while the king's cows were able to get a drink of water merely by pressing their chins down on a lever that would bring them all of the water that they needed.

Afghanistan is a country which could teach the rest of the world a great deal about recycling. Virtually nothing is wasted in Afghanistan, and virtually nothing is ever thrown away. When we were there, there were stores that sold used paint, and there were some restaurants that sold leftover food. There were stores that would mend broken cups and saucers. Tires that had

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been thrown away were converted by the Afghans into buckets that they would lower into wells. Old kerosene cans were converted into musical instruments (a cross between a guitar and a banjo).

In general, Westerners are not aware of the many contributions that the Muslim cultures in general and the Afghan culture in particular, have made to Western civilization. Afghan hounds originally came from Afghanistan, as did Afghan quilts. The Afghan quilt was originally a tent designed by the nomadic Kuchi tribe. Since they were constantly traveling, the Kuchi tents were constantly being torn. Since they were constantly having babies, the tribes were growing, so the tents had to be mended and extended. Wherever the Kuchies went, therefore, they were on the lookout for hydes, old coats, blankets or pieces of heavy cloth to be sewed into their tents for mending and extending. And thus the "Afghan" quilt was invented.

In many ways, the Islamic culture became developed and sophisticated before Western culture did, and sometimes, Western culture is not aware of the significant influences Islamic culture has had on the West. For example, two of the earliest writing systems were the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt (which required the Rosetta Stone for their decipherment), and the Avestan Cunieform writing of Ancient Persia. Cunieform was called nail writing (rasmaixat mixi), and was used in Ancient Afghanistan and Iran to write messages about the exploits of King Darius on the sheared faces of mountains for passers-by to read.

Furthermore, during classical Greek and Roman times, Western culture was using the Roman Numeral system, a system that was good for accounting, but which was terrible for calculating. For the numbers one, two, and three, the Romans would make one, two, or three strokes. After four strokes they would draw a line across, and this became the Roman Numeral V. After nine strokes they would draw another line crossing the line drawn for five, and this

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became X. Then they invented L for 50, C for 100, M for 1,000, etc., and developed the convention that a small number in front of a large number would be subtracted rather than added on, so that 1900 would be written MCM, and the year 1958 would be written MCMLVIII. But Roman Numerals could not be used for complex addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, powers, or square roots, because there was nothing in Roman Numerals to allow a person to get from 1 to 10 to 100 to 1000, etc. in which the first column was units, the second column was tens, the third column was hundreds, etc. This was only possible when Western Civilization shifted from Roman Numerals to Arabic Numerals, since only Arabic Numerals had the "zephr" or zero. If you look at the Arabic Numeral system of today, you will find that the one looks like our one, the two and three look like our two and three, but sideways, the nine looks like our nine but cursive, and the zero looks like our zero, except that it is a dot instead of a circle.

Afghan culture is strange and wonderful. In Afghanistan, the word for "dirt" is "khak." Anything that is the color of dirt, or is in any other way related to dirt is "khaki." It is from this origin that the U.S. military got the name for the color of their uniforms, "khaki." The pants that Afghans wear are called "pyjama." They are loosely fitting pants that are held together at the top with a tie string, and it is from this origin that we get our English word "pyjamas." From Japan, the Afghans imported a garment which the Japanese people called a "kimona." But the Afghans changed the design by lengthening the sleeves to keep their hands warm during cold Afghan winters. This long and colorful coat was named from its source, Japan, and was therefore called a "chapan." I truly believe that this was the type of coat that Joseph wore in the bible--the "coat of many colors."

It is from Muslim culture that Westerners borrowed such terms as "turban," and "bazaar," and "open sesame." It is from Muslim culture that we learned about Sheherazade and the

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"Thousand and one Nights," and about "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." Persian culture is very rich in imagination. In Farsi and Dari, the word for "walnut" is "chahar maghs," which means "four brains." The word for "turkey" is "fil morgh," which means "elephant chicken." The word for "turtle" is "sang posht," which means "rock back." The word for "bed" is "chahar poi," which means "quadraped."

In Afghanistan while we were there, one of the strangest sights was groups of people in the streets carrying huge bow-like instruments. These people were shouting, "We will fluff your mattresses; we will fluff your mattresses." If a family wanted their mattresses fluffed, they would call the people over, and then they would take all of the mattresses from the entire house and dump the cotton into a single room. And then the mattress fluffers would attach their large bows to the ceiling beams of the house, and would begin vibrating the strings of their large bows and dipping the vibrating strings into the pile of cotton. The cotton would get fluffier and fluffier until they were finished. When they were paid and they left, the family would stuff all of the cotton back into the mattress and have pleasant dreams on these fluffed mattresses for another year.

One of the scariest parts of Afglanistan while we were there was the Khyber Pass. This is the pass that Rudyard Kipling wrote about in his many novels. It is the pass between Kabul, Afghanistan and Peshawar, Pakistan. It is the pass which people usually went through in car caravans, and only during daylight hours. It is the pass with overturned buses, trucks, and cars rusting at the bottom, and with plaques about Rudyard Kipling adventures on the mountain walls. Afghans going into the Khyber Pass were not so afraid as were Americans. We saw many buses filled with Afghans going into the pass. These buses were totally filled with people, and on the tops of the buses were more people along with their chickens, goats, and sheep. On the back of

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the buss was a ladder on which three or four more Afghans could hang as they journeyed to Peshawar.

Rudyard Kipling not only wrote about the Khyber Pass. In a novel entitled The Man Who Would Be King, he wrote about the Northeastern Province of Afghanistan. This province used to benamed "Kafiristan" (land of the pagans) until most of the residents converted to Islam, at which time the name was changed to "Nuristan" (land of light).

One of the things that Afghan people used to do during the long Afghan winter nights was to get together to huddle under a blanket and tell Mullah Nasrudin stories. To Afghans, the stories are very humorous, but to Westerners, the stories are illogical and enigmatic. Mullah Nasrudin stories are perfect examples of local logic, and in fact, they are ways of testing even this local logic. For example, Mullah Nasrudin said that he was as strong now as he had been as a youth. When asked for proof, he said, "When I was a youth, there was a huge boulder that I was not able to lift. I am still not able to lift that same boulder, so you can see that I am as strong now as I was then.

One day, a farmer went out to his field and caught Mullah Nasrudin stealing watermelons. He confronted Mullah Nasrudin, and asked, "Why are you stealing my watermelons?" Mullah Nasrudin responded, "I'm not stealing watermelons. I'm merely putting them into this bag so that the wind won't blow them away."

One day Mullah Nasrudin's wife washed his clothing and hung it in a treeso that it could dry. The Mullah was then very tired, so he went to bed. The night was dark and windy, and there were many strange sounds. Mullah was suddenly awakened by an abrupt sound, and he looked out of his window to see something moving. He loaded his gun and shot the intruder, and then he went back to sleep. In the morning he went into his back yard to see what he had shot. It

was his best white shirt that had been hung out to dry. Mullah Nasrudin's wife shouted, "Oh you unlucky man. You have ruined your best shirt." Mullah Nasrudin replied, "Oh, no! I'm very lucky. For only Yesterday I was wearing that shirt. And so without the help of God, I would surely have been killed."

Mullah Nasrudin fell into a hole. A man went to the Mullah and said, "Mullah, please give me your hand and I will pull you out the of the hole." Other men went to the Mullah and said, "Mullah, please give me your hand and we will pull you out of the well." Finally, the wise man came along, and said "Mullah, please take my hand, and I will pull you out of the well." This time the request was honored, and the Mullah was pulled from the well. When the wise man was asked why his request had succeeded when all others had failed, the wise man replied, "Mullahs are much more used to taking than to giving."

In Muslim countries, Friday is a day of worship, and the local Mullah is responsible for giving the sermons. Mullah Nasrudin was not an ordinary Mullah, however. When Friday came around, he was not prepared to give his sermon, so he asked his congregation, "How many of you know what I am going to say?" Of course noone knew. So Mullah Nasrudin said, "I am not going to preach a sermon to a group of such stupid people."

When the next Friday came around, Mullah Nasrudin was still not prepared to give his sermon, so he asked his congregation, "How many of you know what I am going to say?" By now, the congregation knew that if they didn't raise their hands they would get no sermon, so they all raised their hands. Mullah Nasrudin said, "That's great. Now I will not have to preach my sermon."

When the third Friday came around, Mullah Nasrudin was still not prepared to give his sermon, so he asked his congregation, "How many of you know what I am going to say?" In the

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meantime, the congregation had determined a new strategy, so half of the hands went up (that they knew), and the other half of the hands stayed down (that they didn't know). So Mullah Nasrudin said."That's great. Those of you who know, please tell the ones who don't know." And again, Mullah Nasrudin left the Mosque without preaching his sermon.

Afghanistan is a country of proverbs and paradoxes. One Afghan proverb says, "Don't be successful so that you can help other people; be unsuccessful so that other people will help you." There is an Afghan story about the king who rode into a province, and asked for an egg. The farmer gave the king an egg and said it would cost 1,000 Afghanies. When the kind said that he hadn't realized that eggs were so scarce in that province, the farmer replied, "Oh, it's not eggs that are scarce, it is kings." Whenever someone buys something in Afghanistan, the price that is given is just the starting price. The customer is expected to bargain the price down to a price that is more reasonable, but usually our cultural and language skills and our sense that "time is money" all tend to make Americans very bad bargainers. But when we were in Afghanistan, there was an American peace corps volunteer who knew the language, who knew the culture, and who knew how to bargain. When the salesman showed the peace-corps volunteer the holes in his shirt and in his shoes, the peace-corps volunteer showed the salesman the holes in his shirt, and his shoes, and in his underwear as well. He got a very good price.

One of the staple foods in Afghanistan is nan, a whole-grain bread that is truly delicious just after is is baked. Whenever the Nilsens needed some nan, we would send Siddiq to the bakery with some money, and he would always bring us back some change when he brought back the bread, but we suspected that he was skimming quite a bit off the top before he gave us our change. So one day, Alleen and Don went to a neighborhood Afghan bakery, and stood in line for a while, and ordered a loaf of nan. While we were waiting for the bread to be baked a

young Afghan girl came over to us and said, "Oh, Professor Nilsen. Welcome to our bakery." I said "Hi," and added that we had come over to buy some nan, and we wondered how much it cost. She responded, "Oh, for you, nothing. Here, take two loaves."

"Shish Kabob" is an Afghan food that has been transported to the West. However, the West gets its "pilaf" from Greece rather than from Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, this dish is called "Pilau" and its contents vary. The Nilsens were invited to an Afghan home to eat grapes, pilau, tea, and nan. The pilau consisted of rice, almonds, orange peel, raisins, and chicken. After dinner, one of the Afghans asked us how often we ate pilau in the states. We had to tell him that in the United States, pilau is not one of our basic foods. He never fully understood why not.

Afghanistan has a proverb that tells something about how Afghans feel about men and women. The Farsi expression "safid riche" means "white beard," and it is used to designate an old person who has garnered much wisdom during his many years on earth. So the Afghans have a proverb about the "safid riche" that goes, "If you see an old man, sit down and learn a lesson; if you see an old woman, throw a stone." After we had returned to America and thought about it a while, we realized that Americans have sayings which reflect the same type of bias. We talk about "grandfatherly advice," and we also talk about "old wive's tales."

Our daughter Nicolette was six years old when she was in Afghanistan. On one special occasion, Xan-Ali, our "bacha" or house boy gave her a beautiful tribal dress, and when my Afghan university students visited us at our home Nicolette was proudly wearing the dress Xan-Ali had given her. The university students were appaled. "That's a Hazara dress!" they proclaimed. "The Hazaras are the lowest class in Afghan culture." "We will have to buy your daughter a new dress that represents a higher-level Afghan tribe." So they all chipped in and bought Nicolette a new dress.

One day we decided to take a picture of Nicolette standing next to an Afghan girl of about the same age. The Afghan girl had a brother who was watching us pose the two girls for the picture. All of a sudden, he jumped into the picture. We thought he was just a ham, and he wanted his picture taken with the other two children, but we were wrong. He immediately began taking off his clumpy shoes and putting them on his sister's bare feet. He didn't want a picture of his barefooted sister to represent his culture, so he was just giving her his shoes so that she would not be barefooted. The Afghan camerman had seen this entire vignette, and he also saw that a six-year-old Afghan girl looked a bit strange in clumpy boy's shoes. So, when he shot the picture, he shot the two girls from the ankles up only.

In the Bamyan region of Afghanistan there used to be two giant buddhas that stood forty meters high. In 1968, the American cub scouts took a trip to Bamyan to see the buddhas. They were carved into the face of a mountain, and could be seen from miles away. As we got closer, we saw that the faces had been flattned from the mouth up; there were no eyes or noses. We found out later that the original buddhas had had golden faces, and that the buddhas had been defaced many years ago by the Afghans. In 2001 we were all saddned to see in the news that the Taliban had fired artillery shells into the buddhas to destroy what was left of them. They were happy to be destroying an icon of an earlier religion, but they were also happy to be destroying something which they considered blasphemous, and which the West so much revered as an archeological treasure.

As a final example of the local logic that can be found in Afghan humor, consider the English signs that were there when the Nilsens lived there. We were first amazed at how many signs in Afghanistan were written in English. We were then amazed at how many of these signs were misspelled. And we were finally amazed at how logical the misspellings were. These

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misspelled signs gave us a whole new appreciation for the idea that many errors have a perfectly fine logic of their own. Only after we had seen the sign "FIPST AID STATION" and "ORY CLEANER" did we realize how similar "P" is to "R," and how similar "O" is to "D." Only after we had seen the sign "BOOX" did we realize that in pronunciation "KS" can be exactly the same as "X." Only after we had seen the sign "CHILDREN,S WORLD" did we realize that an apostrophe and a comma are actually the same mark of punctuation: it is only the positioning that differs. And the sign "KANDAHARP AINT HOUSE" has all of the right letters and they're all in the correct order. There is only a small problem with spacing.

When we saw the sign "FLOWER AND BUCKET MAKER" we didn't know what to make of it. It was a beautiful sign, and the words were accompanied with beautiful baskets of flowers. It truly took us a while to figure out that there was another language interfering here, for what this shop actually made was "FLOWERS AND BOUQUETS." After we had used out bilingual skills to figure out this sign, we were ready to answer the question of why the "IXAT" and "REBRAB" signs appeared so often. The signs are actually not mistakes at all. The problem is that Farsi uses Arabic letters, which are written from right to left (not left to right as English is written). So if a person writes "TAXI" and "BARBER" from right to left rather than from left to right, the results must indubidibly by "IXAT" and "REBRAB."

Westerners have long been interested in Afghanistan, both because of its central location, and because of its exoticness. In fact the word "Afghanistanism" has entered the English as a situation where there is a great deal of news coverage and other interest in a place that seems to be so far away and unimportant. Before Afghanistan, it was Lichtenstein, which was the name of the country that fought a war with America in order to get American foreign aid. This event

was chronicled in Lawrence Wibberly's book, The Mouse that Roared. It seems to us that the mouse might be roaring again.

EPILOGUE:

If you want to know more about Afghanistan, please check out our "Afghanistan for Kids" web site at http://www.public.asu.edu/~apnilsen/afghanistan4kids/ . Islamic culture is very rich, and has made many important contributions to Western Culture. And Western Culture has also made a number of important contribution to the Islamic world. As we go forward into an uncertain world, my hope is that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cultures will be able to live in peace and share important knowledge with each other. En Shaalaa!

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